

## State Technical Committee Meeting Minutes

January 31, 2008

In attendance, Susan Marquart, PACD; Christopher Clauser, BluAcres LLC.; Mark Roberts, USFWS; Ed Rajotte, Penn State/IIPM; Kristne Saache-Blunk, Penn State/AU&ENV Center; Jennifer Reed-Harry, PA Farm Bureau; Barry Frantz, NRCS; Karl Brown, PA State Conservation Commission (SCC); Doug Goodlander, PA SCC; Bob Gibson, PA Department of Environmental Protection; Gene O'Dato PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; Mike Pruss, Pennsylvania Game Commission; Martha Joseph, NRCS; Fred Suffian, Environmental Protection Agency; Shon Robbins, Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever; Dan Dostie, NRCS; Tim Emenheiser, NRCS; Curtis Schreffler, USGS; Dan Galeone, USGS; Bill Bowers, NRCS; Gary Smith, NRCS; Andrew Kling, NRCS; Chrystal Fetzer, FSA; William Foose, FSA; Barry Isaacs, NRCS; Carl Rohr, DEP; Noel Soto, NRCS; Mark Dubin, Chesapeake Bay; Jane Heller, York County Conservation Alliance; David Day, PA Fish and Boat Commission; Ed White, NRCS.

Barry Frantz, NRCS opened the meeting at approximately 9:05 am with leading participant introductions. Bill Bowers, NRCS acting State Conservationist thanked everyone for taking the time to come out and express their viewpoints; they are valuable. We always listen although we don't always agree with all comments we receive the feedback is important.

Barry Frantz gave a little background information about why we hold the State Technical Committee meetings and what the agenda was for this meeting. We had originally hoped to have the Farm Bill by this meeting, but since we don't we will work as we did in Fiscal Year 2007.

Bill Foose, FSA, gave an update of FSA activities. FSA is basically at a stand still since authorization ended with the 2002 Farm Bill at the end of FY 2007. Since it may be a while before we have a Farm Bill in place he didn't have much information to provide. Bill did give an update on CREP/CRP activities; enrollment for CREP is extended to April 15, 2008. The update included the recent celebration in Washington D.C. to commemorate the one millionth acre enrolled in CREP. Pennsylvania leads the Nation in CREP acres. Currently there are 189,000 total CREP acres in Pennsylvania, with 168,000 enrolled in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. 38,000 CREP acres of Native Grass in PA. PA can enroll up to 65,000 CREP acres in the Ohio River CREP, there are currently 21,000 enrolled. PA does have acres eligible for enrollment up to a maximum of 200,000. Bill took questions:

Q: If a participant decides to drop out of CREP will those acres be eligible for re-enrollment with a new participant?

A: Yes.

Q: Can currently enrolled CREP acres be re-enrolled after the expiration of the current contract?

A: Yes.

Q: Is the government allowing CREP contract holders to terminate early to put acres back into production?

A: There was talk at NHQ about allowing this, but FSA isn't in favor—we have invested a great deal into the establishment of these acres. A decision/policy has not been released regarding this subject.

Q: Where would the money for CREP re-enrollment come from?

A: Monies for CREP contracts will come from budget items within the FSA budget.

Barry Frantz, gave an overview of the CNMP Quality Criteria Planning Standards. CNMP is similar to ACT 38 plans and NRCS is encouraging farmers to get a plan. The NRCS definition covers what an eligible acre of cropland is. NRCS had 185 applications for CNMP contracts. Barry provided the meeting participants with a listing of the practice standards available in the Pennsylvania electronic Field Office Technical Guide. Barry also told the participants where National practice standards could be found online <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/Standards/index.html>. The two practices have been recently updated on eFOTG include Feed Management and Waste Treatment Facility. Dan Dostie, NRCS State Resource Conservationist was given the opportunity to speak to the group on Conservation Practice Standards and briefly described the work of the SRC and the Ecological Sciences and Planning Staff in Harrisburg. Bill Bowers was also given the opportunity to speak to the group about the importance of their comments when practice standards are released to the committee for review. He encouraged the committee to tell us what you like and what you do not like. He spoke of keeping the practice standards updated and program neutral and again encouraged the committee to comment when the standards are released.

Barry Frantz touched on moving forward with Integrated Pest Management and opened the floor for questions.

Q: Where do the endangered species conservation effects take place?

A: Within the ranking system.

Q: What benefits are there for “at risk species”?

A: That question has been deferred until the 2009 program.

Dan Dostie, NRCS adds to the answer and reiterates that conservation practices are program neutral and priorities guide us.

Ed White, NRCS State Soil Scientist gave an update of the Soil Survey. 100% of PA's soils are on the online Soil Survey. There are Soil Scientists located throughout the state. There will be a

realignment of offices by Major Land Resource Areas (MLRA), Pennsylvania will have two MLRA offices in Leesport and Erie with data stored there. Soil surveys were done on a county by county basis and therefore are inconsistent. Now that the maps via counties are all digital, it is easier to reference. The data is better and can be made more consistent. It is our goal to improve the data and have unity in all databases. They will be updated by MRLA and the focus is primarily on the critical ones. Printed soil surveys are out of date and are no longer updated nor are they valid for USDA programs.

Barry Frantz turned the discussion to Conservation Planning Initiatives. Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's REAP and One Plans and NRCS's Put Planning First. NRCS and PDA are on the same page regarding the importance of having a conservation plan in place. It is the first step in for NRCS programs. Barry is concerned that the One Plan will be mistaken with the initiative titled the same from several years ago that was not successful. Karl Brown, State Conservation Commission, presented an update on REAP. The program has helped to resolve issues that have been around for years. REAP's criteria promotes conservation planning for basic resource concerns and does not approve requests where a conservation plan does not exist. Karl took questions from the group:

Q: How broad is the limit for the purchase of no-till equipment?

A: There isn't a limit besides the \$150,000 dollar cap over the life of the program for all categories. The equipment must be consistent with the plan that is in place.

Q: Was there an initial concern that there wouldn't be enough people with plans in place making them eligible for REAP?

A: No. REAP was up and running in approximately 120 days and received 394 applications worth \$12 million in tax credits. \$10 million in 10 days.

Q: Because REAP signed up \$10 million in so quickly are you considering raising the bar on conservation plan regulations.

A: No, we are not.

Up to \$10 million yearly, are the guidelines for conservation plans going to be revised to include all five resource concerns, soil water, nutrient concerns? RMS is a goal but not many people have it.

Dan Dostie, NRCS gave an overview of Certified Conservation Planning Training regarding the criteria for partners, TSPs, NRCS employees. He also explained where the Tech Req-lists TSPs/ qualifications training certifications could be accessed on the web.

## Summarization of FY 08

Possible funding in programs that initially there were no funds.

AMA: monies extended until July 1

CSP sign ups not announced, no word on when if?

EQIP monies 85% obligated

GRP monies zero

FRPP monies re-authorization extended some monies

WHIP monies re-authorization extended some monies

WRP monies re-authorization extended some monies

CIG monies still time for National and State

Noel Soto, NRCS gave an overview for EQIP's CIG components, the National, Chesapeake Bay, and State CIG components. The deadlines are for National February 20, 2008, for Chesapeake Bay February 29, 2008 and for Pennsylvania February 27, 2008. Noel also gave details on multiple CIG programs, where the concentration of the funding goes and who normally applies for CIG.

At this David Day, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission expressed his concerns about fish and wildlife.

Barry Frantz gave an overview of the 2008 EQIP payment rates which are flat. NRCS pays a flat rate in the full amount allowed for practices based on the practices completed. The EQIP first ranking deadline is moving up to the end of October. Contract Cap for EQIP for 2008 is based on the National EQIP rule with a practice cap of \$250,000. CNMPs were reviewed including what is covered by the laws of EQIP.

Martha Joseph, NRCS gave an easement update: The easements are being move into an online database similar to other web-based accounting systems NRCS already uses. Other points covered:

- ☐ Over the life of the program, FRPP has invested over \$28 million towards farmland protection efforts in Pennsylvania, assisting with the purchase of almost 300 easements on 41,178 acres.
- ☐ 79% of the acres protected in Pennsylvania through FRPP are either prime soils or soils of statewide importance.
- ☐ FRPP Status—Funding Trends
  - 2006: \$2, 843, 472

- 2007: \$3, 067, 978
- 2008: Pending

❑ FY 2008 FRPP Program Implementation

- Fiscal year FA allocation TBA within next week
- No Requests for Proposals Expected this year
- Funds will be obligated through amendments to 2007 Cooperative Agreements with PDA, Berks County, Lebanon County, Union County, and Land Conservancy of Adams County.

❑ FY 2008 Anticipated Changes

- Agricultural easements will continue in new Farm Bill
- Proposed Program formats include existing format or change to block grants
- Requests for NRCS technical assistance to develop conservation plans for easements will continue
- Conservation plans to focus on soil and water quality criteria

❑ WRP Highlights for 2007:

- Fiscal year allocation of \$1.03 Million
- 6 permanent easements
- 4 restoration only cost share agreements
- 405 acres of new conservation plans written
- 116 acres of wetlands created, restored, or enhanced on prior year contracts

❑ FY 2008 Program Implementation

- WRP authorization extended to March 15<sup>th</sup>
- Program expected to be re-authorized in new Farm Bill
- No major changes to structure of program expected
- Provisions related to valuation and payment limitations under discussion between House and Senate
- \$105,00 Received during First Quarter
- Easements with greater than average acreage have been submitted in Northwest
- 3 Restoration Cost-share agreements funded

❑ STC Input Needed

- Revision of Geographic Cap?
- Establishment of Geographic Focus Areas?
- Outreach to Potential Customers?

❑ Grasslands Reserve Program

- Seven Easements recorded in PA
- No funding available until new Farm Bill
- No major changes expected in implementation of program, except perhaps fewer enrollment options
- ❑ Future of GRP in Pennsylvania
  - Grassland habitat in Pennsylvania often requires continuous management measures to prevent succession to woody habitat
  - Program intended to protect and preserve grasslands and associated wildlife
  - How best to target GRP in PA?
  - Conservation plans for enrolled lands must currently address nesting and brood-rearing needs of declining bird species.
  - Restoration or renovation of grassland habitat available
- ❑ Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP)
  - Authorized in 2003 under Title V of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act
  - NRCS acquired administration of program in 2005
  - Pilot program efforts during FY 2006 and FY 2007 in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Maine
  - Farm Bill proposes to move HFRP under Title XII
- ❑ Enrollment Options
  - 99-year easements (Farm Bill proposals replace with permanent easement option)
  - 30-year easements
  - Restoration-only agreements
- ❑ Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP)
  - Promotes the recovery of threatened and endangered species
  - Improves biodiversity
- ❑ Background Information
  - Many forests need active management to restore health and function to sustain biodiversity and habitat for species that have suffered significant population decline
  - HRPP incorporated Safe Harbor provisions to facilitate landowner's voluntary adoption of management practices that improve habitat for protected species
- ❑ HFRP Opportunities in PA
  - Identification of Particular Management measures for which Safe Harbor Assurances would be beneficial to program implementation?

Meeting concluded at approximately 12:00 pm. Participants stayed after for individual discussions.